

# Identity and Community: Somali Children's Adjustments to Life in the Western World.

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## Introduction

In this paper we give an overview of what life is like for Somali children in Hamilton, New Zealand, especially the influence of western practices (Kahin, 1997). From refugee camps in Kenya and elsewhere, most have been transported to New Zealand without much preparation and placed in a very different social and physical environment. Adapting and learning new ways to behave takes some time, and we are observing some changes now that we believe can be made smoother.

Our research projects have been running for over five years but involve more informal or ethnographic methods than traditional "psychological" studies of cross-cultural practices (Guerin, B. et al., 2003a). To accomplish this, the different researchers have variously lived in the community, worked for Refugee and Migrant Service (RMS) to resettle 65 Somali and Iraqi Quota refugees into Hamilton, worked for the Ministry of Education as Refugee Coordinator, and done volunteer work such as helping RMS, teaching volunteer English classes to Somali men, running exercise classes for Somali women for three years, and acting as leaders on a summer camp for Somali boys. Between us, we have talked to hundreds of children of all ages.

Such activities we see as integral and necessary parts of our research methods, rather than merely for establishing rapport, and spending lots of time with the community informally helps get behind the standard answers often give by these groups to please the interviewers, because of poor English, or because of the worry that NZIS or other government agencies might find something out about them.

Unlike westernized populations, but more like many Maori and Pacific Islander communities, the different arenas of life cannot be easily *compartmentalized*, and research in any of these areas usually involves the others also. For this reason we only nominally divide our projects

into research on: a census of Somali in Hamilton, households and mobility, discrimination and racism (Guerin, 2003a), employment, health (Guerin, B. et al., 2003b), mental health (Guerin, B. et al., 2003c; Yates et al., 2003), women's fitness and exercise (Guerin, P. et al., 2003), and children and schooling—the topic for this paper.

As background, New Zealand accepts about 1000 refugees every year, not including those coming through family reunification programmes. New Zealand accepts many women-at-risk and over ¾ of refugees are women and children, although more men arrive through family reunification. Quota and asylum refugees get a 6-week introduction to life in New Zealand at the Mangere Centre, but family reunification arrivals do not.

Somali refugees have been arriving in New Zealand since 1993 and the initial refugees were mainly women and children. Almost all are Muslims and differ in many ways from other New Zealanders—race, colour, religion, social practices, clothes, language and food. For this reason alone, they are an interesting group to work with. Somali make up the largest group of current refugees in Hamilton, with about 900 in the city of 100,000. There are a few suburbs with concentrations of Somali living there, but they are much more dispersed than Auckland on the whole and the children go to a variety of schools.

## Children Adapting

To simplify, the main influences on western children are the family and school (Zine, 2001). Time is divided between the two for most of the year, and peers and friends typically are met through the school, and sports are typically organized through the schools also. For Somali children, however, there is only a weak link between family and school, and the major influences are between the Somali community, the Islamic communities, and the extended family. Peers and friends are typically met through the Somali community or through family, and sports are organized by the Somali

community rather than through schools. These differences need to be kept in mind when trying to understanding the children, since the influences come from very different arenas of life to other children.

It is often thought that children adapt more easily to changes than older persons, and that it is harder for adults to adapt. While true in some ways, it must also be kept in mind for refugee children that they have added constraints (1) from being refugees, and (2) from typically getting exposed to many features of western society that their parents might not even know about.

As refugees, the Somali children will usually have added constraints of poor or mediocre English, interruptions in their schooling (often for five to ten years), unemployed parents and low income, poorer housing and neighbourhoods, absent family members, and weak support or discrimination from those outside the Somali community (McGown, 1999). While they do have strong community support from within the Somali community, it must be remembered that the social networks are often severely disrupted or changed from what they might once have been, so we are dealing with a damaged social network, albeit strong.

With regards to the exposure to western practices, many of the Somali women leave the house rarely, and the men often divide their time only between the house and the Mosque, except perhaps for English lessons (Guerin, B. et al., 2003b). This means that they do not come into contact with western practices that their children will learn about from school. The children experience things their parents do not.

Foremost amongst their new influences are the events the Somali children can observe for themselves. They see new behaviour patterns enacted by the children at their school, and see that consequences they might receive for such behaviours are not forthcoming. This includes new gender roles, the idea of individual autonomy and control, differences in how communities and individual are valued, how commodities are valued and used for social interaction, clothing, and methods of social influence used in everyday western life. They also have easier availability of many items prohibited by their religion or their parents, items such as alcohol, drugs and other illegal

substances, indecent materials, gambling opportunities, and new technologies. They also learn the overarching role of money in affecting social relationships in western countries, and the practical value placed on money and getting money.

There are also particular issues that arise for Somali at schools (Kahin, 1997). Problems can arise in fine arts from having to draw human forms, in dress, in performing arts from music, in swimming from mixing boys and girls together, in sex education, and in health and drug education. Some of these arise from Islam, some from Somali culture.

The schooling problems are compounded, however, by western schools depending heavily upon parents to be involved. In Somalia, parents were not often involved in their children schooling. They valued it highly and wanted their children educated, but did not themselves work with the schools. Indeed, it was often thought a bad thing for a parent to visit a school since that almost always meant that their child was in trouble for something. Parents also do not get involved in schools because their English is often worse than their children's, making it difficult to communicate with teachers. Many worry about the western influences on their children and prefer not to have contact. Often, parents in fact rely on their children to tell them how they are doing at school and what needs to be done. We know of one case in which a small girl told her mother that she had to watch *The Simpsons* on television for her homework.

### **Noticing Changes in Children's Behaviour**

There are some key signals known from research with other groups that children are changing and being influenced by western patterns and practices. The first, *generational breakdown* is usually gauged by indicators of:

- lack of respect for elders, religious leaders and community leaders
- changes in gender codes (girls are especially criticized for this)
- disinterest in things Somali, especially learning the language
- viewing religious or community influence now as "pressuring"
- changing parental roles

The second indicator, *changing relationships*, is usually noticed through the wish for dating and contact with the opposite sex, wanting boyfriends and girlfriends, abandoning arranged and parentally influenced marriages, and choosing traditionally unsuitable partners such as those from other races, nations, or religions.

The final indicator, *capitalism* (Guerin, 2003b), is noticed through the emphasis on money, income, and commodities over family, community and religion.

Many of these problems and issues became apparent during exercise classes run for Somali women by the second author over some years (Guerin, P. et al., 2003). Both older and younger women attended the classes, although a suspicion was that some of the older women were only there to observe the younger girls.

Aside from any other generational issues for Somali girls, there are some that are particular to their refugee status. Typically, the younger Somali girls speak better English than the older women who might not even speak English and might not even read or write Somali. The younger girls are also more familiar with western and urban practices and ways of doing things, whereas many of the older women have come directly from nomadic or pastoral, rural cultures. Finally, the younger girls tend to be split between two cultural worlds whereas the older women side with traditional practices on the whole.

These differences were gradually noticed through changes made by younger girls in the dress, music and dancing at exercise classes. The traditional dress is with Burqa (full cover) or Hijab (hair covered) along with veils, flat sandals and henna body art if any. A *Modified Traditional Dress* was soon noticed, consisting of bright veils with no scarf, more form-fitting dresses, and jewellery. Gradually, more of the girls began wearing a Westernized Dress consisting of denim skirts on the hips with some stomach showing under popular tops, tight fitting skirts, veils only loosely on the head if at all, high platform shoes, and both jewellery and make-up.

In a similar way, the music requested changed from traditional drum rhythms, clapping and singing, to a *Modified Traditional Music* of Somali music but with synthesizers and Somali

lyrics, to a Westernized Music consisting of Somali vocalists and musicians playing western music with synthesizers and English lyrics. Given the chance, many of the girls would have asked for western hip-hop or soul music instead. For the dancing, the traditional clapping, stamping feet, and turning, gave way to a modified dance with more seductive uses of the hips similar to Pacific dancing, which gave way to western dancing of hip-hop or R&B in which recent music videos were copied.

These changes brought on some conflict between the younger and older women that needed intervention lest the exercise classes become shut down. In the end, hip-hop music and “dirty dancing” were prohibited but the girls could exercise to some new music. The trade-off for this was that traditional Somali dancing was taught during the last hour of classes. So the girls had a forum to be taught traditional dance in which it was made “cool”. This kept the older women happy with some western intrusions elsewhere in the classes.

With respect to the Somali boys, similar changes can be seen in other arenas of life although we believe there is an added problem. It is known that various problems arise for the “generation in-between” (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002) who arrived as refugees in their teens with little or no English and therefore could not be properly placed at any level of mainstream schooling. Alitolppa-Niitamo (2002) has shown with her sample that this group have a difficult time, more so than adults arriving as refugees or the second generation of children who grow up in mainstream schools speaking reasonable English as a first or second language.

These problems are real but we have noticed an added problem stemming from the fact that girls are typically looked after by their mothers within the family whereas the boys traditionally are looked after, raised and disciplined by male members of the family. New Zealand requested primarily women and children in need from the UNHCR, which meant that the first generations arriving were primarily single mothers with many children. While the girls have in general done well, we have found that many of the boys lack an authority to control them and they might not have had an adult male in the family for ten or more years. So in addition to the “generation in-between” problems, this added problem has led to that cohort of boys having particular

difficulties not experienced by the younger boys raised in New Zealand, and who are much less controlled by the community. This group can also present a poor image of the Somali community as a whole.

## **Interventions**

The good news from all these changes and issues is that such conflicts are well-known and identifiable from past and present research. Other groups have been through such changes before, which means that the potential is there for the community to intervene before any conflict becomes too nasty or out of control. We are doing that in the present case through two strategies:

- Finding schools that Somali do well at and documenting their strategies for achieving this
- Documenting strategies used for similar problems by past refugee groups

In both cases, the materials documented are fed to the community to give them ideas to work from for their interventions.

In a Masters Thesis research project, the third author has interviewed principals, teachers, students and parents from schools in Hamilton which seem to be working well with Somali children. From this, the usual problems and issues have been noted, but also a wide variety of strategies for doing things well. This has led us to propose some positive strategies that other schools might adopt or experiment with:

- Inviting parents to go on school trips rather than have them prohibit their children from going
- Translate school letter, reports, notices, etc. into Somali
- Produce a video showing all the facets of the school system, including forms and letter, where to go at school, etc., without viewers needing English
- Specific parent-teacher nights
- Bilingual teaching assistants who have flexibility to act as go-betweens with parents
- Build more flexibility into placing Somali into age-groups or ability-groups at different times of the day

In these ways, other schools can also benefit and use these strategies to develop their own processes.

The other intervention is to document how older refugee and immigrant groups, such as Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Indian dealt with the same problems, and to present those strategies for the newer groups, such as Somali, to experiment with as a community. In a Masters project by Emma Wood (Wood & Guerin, 2003), Indian women, both young and older, were interviewed about how the issue of arranged marriages and dating were handled for them or their daughters (where applicable). Some of the older women talked about both their own marriage as well as their daughters'.

From these interviews, a long list of strategies to handle these family crises without too much conflict were developed, and these are being presented to the Somali community for consideration when they tackle such problems. Such issues are only just beginning to arise in the Somali community in Hamilton, so the listings might help before the problems become more lasting. We have recorded isolated cases of these issues, and one or two major rebellions, but they are not yet widespread in the community.

As examples, here are three of the strategies taken from the interviews with Indian women talking about their own experiences:

- Many children are quite happy for the parents to be involved in arranging the marriage so long as they do not feel a strong pressure from them. Most still want their parents to approve of their marriage and like their spouse but they typically want to select someone themselves and to get to know them better before marriage.
- Parents are often worried about bad things happening to their daughters rather than just the fact that what they are doing goes against old traditions. This needs to be communicated to the children.
- Just by living in a western country the children will not be the same as the parents were when they were young. Recognize this and use it as a basis for mutual compromise. They will have

had different experiences, they might be more educated, and the world they live in has changed.

There is no guarantee that such ideas can be adapted by the Somali community for their particular backgrounds, context, and histories, but it is a start.

## Conclusions

There are influences on Somali refugee children not of their making that their parents will often not experience. Adding this to the problems they face anyway from a refugee background can make it extremely difficult for them to adjust and get on. As one Somali girl put it, “*I feel like I’m living in two worlds*” (Halima, 18 year old girl, New Zealand).

Despite this, most of the Somali children are doing well and getting on, but from all the past research, we know that there are many hurdles still to overcome—problems and issues that are almost certain to arise from their situation but which have not surfaced yet. Knowing this, however, means that they have time to do something about those problems before they happen. To this end, we are trying various interventions in collaboration to help them prepare before the problems occur.

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